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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/11/2018
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI BLOGGERS DEBATE MEDIA FREEDOM AND QUESTION
AL-FARHAN ARREST

REF: RIYADH 00005

Classified By: A/DCM David Rundell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Two Saudi bloggers highlighted differences within the blogger community over whether media freedom is a human right or not during a February 24 meeting with PA Officer. Both bloggers noted the lack of formal charges against jailed blogger Al-Farhan which makes the Saudi blogosphere "suspicious" of his arrest, apparently sparked by his blog entry calling for the release of a group of Jeddah men arrested on charges of supporting terrorism. End summary.

¶2. (C) Saudi bloggers Ahmad Al-Omran (please protect) of Saudi Jeans and Saeed Al-Gaber (please protect) of Elaph questioned whether the National Society of Human Rights (NSHR), a Saudi non-governmental human rights organization, has a role to play in the Al-Farhan case (reftel), and media freedom cases in general. Al-Omran maintains freedom of the media is a human right; therefore, it should be protected by the NSHR. Al-Gaber, however, stated the SAG has always drawn a clear line between the two freedoms, and the NSHR surely will not cross it. He said media freedom was never a part of NSHR's mandate. He believes the Society purposely avoided this issue to ensure mainstream support during its founding. Proof of his claim, he asserted, is that the SAG has blocked, and continues to block Elaph, the site he blogs on and edits, for several years. The NSHR has never come to their aid.

¶3. (C) Both men are avid supporters of Al-Farhan's release (reftel), but they have become increasingly discouraged whether his release is imminent. Popular support for Al-Farhan's release, however, continues to increase. The "Free Fouad" facebook group-page has grown to 997 members as of March 8. Al-Omran noted about half are Saudis. In addition to refusing to make formal charges against Al-Farhan, the Minister of Interior has not released any new information regarding the case. Al-Omran said the SAG could have charged him with "defaming the government," and no Saudi would contest it, but it did not. Al-Gaber suggested the lack of formal charges makes the SAG's arrest "suspicious." Both reiterated the SAG has a habit of banning or intimidating journalists/ bloggers, but not arresting them.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: A general sense of apprehension continues to fill the Saudi blogosphere after Al-Farhan's arrest; bloggers remain unsure about the SAG's true intentions. Both the arrest and the lack of formal charges have left bloggers boggled. Young bloggers continue to question whether a true culture of human rights can develop here if the SAG continues to hinder forward-moving media trendsetters. End comment.

FRAKER